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Iran-Contra Storm Is Hardly Creating Ripple in Nicaragua

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Managua Plays Down Affair,
And the Popular Reaction
Is Mostly Bewilderment

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—As the Iran-Contra hearings rivet Washington's attention, the revelations about White House policy in Central America are causing little fuss in the Nicaraguan capital.

Most Nicaraguans say they are bewildered by the complexity of U.S. law and of a scandal that includes covert operations across Central America and the Middle East. Government officials are matter-of-factly about the hearings: "This simply reflects and confirms what we've been saying all along," says Vice Foreign Minister Victor Tinoco. "By logic, this hearing should lower the possibility of an invasion. But you still can't rule that out. You still don't know how the executive branch will react."

While Sandinista government comment has been scant, sarcastic barbs published in the official press seem to be aimed at Capitol Hill as much as at the Reagan White House. Last Sunday, a cartoon in the Sandinista Party newspaper *Barricada* depicted three confused American legislators trying to find their way through a black void with inadequate flashlights.

Playing Down the Hearings

Barricada has usually played down the hearings, even when testimony shed light on important Contra developments. On Tuesday, for example, *Barricada* put on its back page a story about an allegation by former State Department consultant Robert Owen that a Contra Miskito leader, later identified as Brooklyn Rivera, accepted \$100,000 from other Contras and the Central Intelligence Agency to break off important negotiations with Managua. In contrast, follow-up stories on the Contras' slaying of American volunteer Benjamin Linder have received more prominent display.

Some evenings, Sandinista television news broadcasts don't mention the hearings at all.

Analysts speculate that the Sandinistas aren't taking full advantage of the scandal's propaganda potential so that citizens aren't given a false sense of security that the Contra war will soon end. The war offers a handy excuse for food shortages and 600% inflation.

Man in the Street's View

And what does the man in the street say?

"The investigation has no value," says Javier Sanchez, 31 years old, a cereal-factory worker, "because the whole world already knows Reagan's role supporting the Contras." Moises Mendoza, a 34-year-old supermarket manager, believes that "it's good they investigate" but that "the United States government will always defend its interests, which are based on imperialistic plans to exploit the people of the Third World."

Berta Estrada, 36, a market woman who is nearly illiterate, says she doesn't have an opinion. She adds: "Only Reagan knows what he's doing."

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